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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic classroom research shows culturally different children follow non-congruent patterns in arguments with their peers. Protests by two first grade boys from different cultures are examined, and some ways in which their protesting styles differ are indicated. A Black American child pursues final protests using successively more aggravated protest strategies; a Vietnamese child mitigates protests but prevails in arguments by reasoning and taunting. Though the arguing systems contrast, they are complementary, and the children's arguments satisfy culturally different expectations. Shift in turn-taking patterns and in choice of aggravated or mitigated forms, during the school year, shows convergence toward shared patterns. (Author/AMH)

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The Protest Function: Constraints on Form Choice

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The Protest Function: Constraints on Form Choice[1]

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When children talk to each other, during play on in cooperative learning tasks, successful communication depends in part on shared expectations about how to interact and what to do when disagreement arises. But research from several disciplines is suggesting that because interactional patterns vary from culture to culture, communication among children in culturally diverse classrooms may be flawed (Gumperz and Herasimchuk, 1975; Michaels, 1980; Philips, 1972; Shultz, Florio, and Erickson, 1981).

The question of how children manage to communicate in culturally diverse classrooms in spite of mismatched communicative styles motivated my year-long ethnographic study of a first grade classroom.[2] The thirty children who spent all or part of the year there came from twelve cultures. I have been analyzing one frequently occurring language function--protesting--and the discourse structure in which protests occur, to see what insights this function may yield into the process by which children communicate despite cultural barriers. Protests are illocutionary acts (Austin, 1962) of negative evaluation conveying that a previous act infringed on the rights or interests of the speaker and that correction is in order (Adger, 1981a; Searle, 1977; Staton, Shuy, and Kreeft, forthcoming). In my data, protests are performed by acts of disagreement, challenges, complaints, denials, orders, refusals and threats.

In this paper I will examine some protests by two boys from different cultures--James, who is Black American, and Hai, who is Vietnamese--pointing out some ways in which their protesting styles differ. Generally, James pursues the final protest in a sequence of protests, using aggravated strategies which escalate the conflict; while Hai uses mitigated strategies which diffuse conflict. James performs the final protest in eighty-seven per cent of his protest sequences, but Hai has the final protest in only twenty-nine per cent of his protest sequences. These styles are congruent with the two patterns Thomas Kochman found in culturally diverse adults' discussions, one pattern more confrontive and emotional, the other non-confrontive and rational (Kochman, 1975), though clearly these patterns can not be attributed solely to cultural differences. I will consider some consequences of the contrasting styles I have found and suggest how the different patterns may be accommodated in the classroom.

Example one is typical of the protest sequences these children engage in. Here conflict arises among James and Hai, and two others: Alex, who is German-American; and Coong, who is Chinese-Vietnamese. The issue is player sequencing in a game just getting under way:[3]

(1) (a) James: Huh, I'm gonna be . You can be first. I'm gonna be second. He's gonna be third.
(b) Hai (pointing): First, second, third.
(c) Coong: [(unclear)
A → (d) Alex (coming to the table): Huh uh. No. Ok, let's do it again, let's do it again.
B → (e) James: No. Lucinda's gonna be first.
A → (f) Hai: How you know?
A → (g) Coong: [Second.
B → (h) James: She told me (unclear) and I'm second.
A (i) Alex: I'm third.
A → (j) Hai: [But she was
B → (k) James: HE'S third and you're fourth and he's fifth.
(l) Alex: Ok.
(m) Hai: OK. OK.

Alex protests the players' ordering in turn (d), "Huh uh. No. Ok, let's do it again. Let's do it again." James protests Alex' protest with a new plan: "No. Lucinda's gonna be first." (At this point, Lucinda is completing her math work.) The boys continue exchanging turns at talk (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1972), each of which has a double function in the sequence: as a protest of the previous utterance, and because protests are Face Threatening Acts (Brown and Levinson, 1977), as a potential offense. Protest follows protest, as in most protest sequences in my data, until something occurs which one of the participants can analyze as not offensive. So in line (1), Alex does not protest. Instead, he accepts James' protest, "HE'S third and you're fourth and he's fifth," with "OK," and the conflict is resolved.

James takes alternate turns at talk in this sequence, as he usually does. Alex, Hai and Coong take the same side in the conflict, position A; James takes position B, as indicated in the example. Alex' "Let's do it again" is A, and James'

"No, Lucinda's gonna be first" is B. Then Hai comes into the A slot with "How you know," and is overlapped by Coong's "Second." James treats both these protests as A to his B by protesting them in order; "She told me" answers Hai's "How you know?" "And I'm second" contradicts Coong's claim to go second in the game. Next Alex comes back with "I'm third" and is overlapped by Hai's "But she was . . . ." James treats "I'm third" as A, although it is not the immediately preceding utterance, and contradicts it with "HE'S third and you're fourth and he's fifth" to get the B slot. Thus, James has taken alternating turns in this sequence until one of his protests is not protested. Apparently, his conversational goal is a final protest. In the data I have analyzed he has this slot in thirty-two of thirty-seven protest sequences he participates in during two one-hour math lessons and the free play following.[4]

In fact, example two suggests that performing the last protest of the sequence can be more important for James than pursuing the point which initiated the conflict. This sequence occurred just as six children seated together were settling down to their individual math work. Hai says he's forgotten Alex' name--this tape was made in early October--and James tells Hai to get busy:

(2) (a) Hai: Uuu. I forgot his name again.
(b) Alex: Whose name?
(c) Hai: Your name.
→(d) James (looking at Hai): Read, read, just read. just read!
→(e) Hai: I can't, because I'm reading upside down.
→(f) James: So what. (looks down)
(g) Lucinda: Alex.
(h) Alex: Quiet.

James' first protest, "Read, read, just read, just read," suggests his issue here is Hai and Alex' talk which may be infringing on his rights to quiet or perhaps on his interest in everyone's industry. Presumably a favorable outcome to the conflict which James creates by protesting would be for Hai to read his math book, or at least to be quiet. Instead Hai protests: he refuses to comply by offering an excuse, "I can't because I'm reading upside down." James' response, "So what," seems addressed to the irrelevance of Hai's excuse. While it gets him the last protest, it doesn't address the issue of getting people to work. Furthermore, he breaks eye contact after he says, "So what," suggesting he is finished with the encounter and is not reissuing the order to read. Apparently once there was uptake on James' protest in the form of another protest from Hai, winning the resulting confrontation by getting the last word superceded James' other goals.

Further evidence that James regards the last protest as the conversational prize appears in example three. This sequence followed an episode in which Sylvia had asked Lucinda about instructions for a math book page, and Lucinda had replied (erroneously) that the teacher had said to "Scribble on it." James had concurred with Lucinda, and Sylvia had turned to another group for help.

(3)→(a) Sylvia (turning back to her own table): She didn't say scribble, Lucinda.
(b) Lucinda: (turns toward Sylvia)
(two second pause)
→(c) James: We're not trying to. (throws crayon to Hai)
(ten second pause)
(d) Lucinda (turning to her math work): Uh, one two, three, four.

After Sylvia's protest, "She didn't say scribble, Lucinda," Lucinda indicates uptake by turning to Sylvia, but she does not say anything. Elsewhere in the data, non-verbal uptake with no talk counts conversationally as implicit acceptance of the previous protest. Here, after a pause which must be analyzed as Lucinda's unfilled turn since Sylvia had specifically addressed Lucinda, James protests, "We're not trying to." For James, Lucinda's apparent acceptance of another's protest, her not protesting a protest directed to her, is infelicitous; and her failure is relevant to him because of his participation in Lucinda's previous duplicity. James' protest is prosodically weak and somewhat anomolous--he may have been thrown off by what he perceives as Lucinda's error--but it fills the final protest slot which he consistently seeks.

A key facet of James' protesting style is the tone of the language forms he uses in pursuing the final protest. His protests are tuned to the previous speaker's protest, generally slightly stronger, more aggravated (Labov and Fanshel, 1977) than the previous utterance. In example one, page two, James strongly protests Alex' first protest: he refuses to accept Alex' suggestion to negotiate turn distribution and asserts a

new plan: "No, Lucinda's gonna be first." Next, Hai protests with a formulaic challenge, "How you know?" James treats it as a literal question which allows him to assert his evidence, "She told me," and to close the question/answer pair, claiming the closing turn of the pair and thus of the entire sequence. Finally, he counters Alex' claim to third player position with a counter claim plus elaboration: "HE'S third and you're fourth and he's fifth."

James' ideal pattern for participation in protest sequences, then, seems to be to protest with a more aggravated strategy than the previous speaker's protest, continuing until the interlocuters do not protest to him. His pattern is confrontive: he meets protests with protests. And it is competitive, producing winners and losers, as in the sounding events Labov (1972) studied where ritual insult follows ritual insult until one of the sounders can not top the previous sound. The fact that James sometimes avoids losing by changing the topic or the addressee when he is well into a protest sequence and has not gotten the final protest suggests the interaction is a contest for him.

On the other hand, Hai's participation in protest sequences follows a markedly different pattern. Whereas James' confrontive pattern escalates the conflict, Hai's brand of protests tends to diffuse the conflict. This strategy is culturally appropriate, according to my Asian informants,[5] since the need to preserve harmony dictates avoiding confrontation. Consider

example two, page four, again. Hai meets James' strong protest to "Read, read, just read, just read," with a mitigated protest, "I can't because I'm reading upside down." Hai's prosody and the silliness of the excuse make light of his refusal to comply.

Example four immediately followed example two in actual discourse. The initial issue was Hai's forgetting Alex' name, and here Hai raises it again:

(4) (a) Hai: I call you Alex last time.
→(b) Alex: You better remember that or I'll . hit ya.
→(c) Hai: No you won't.
→(d) Alex: How do you know?
→(e) Hai: Because. You never hit me.
(f) Alex: I know. I won't.→I'll give ya a kiss though.
→(g) Hai: If you give me a kiss, I'll give . . I'll give your girl . . I'll beat up your girlfriend.

Hai responds to Alex' aggravated threat to hit him with a contradiction that seems not very aggravated, "No, you won't." This protest does not end the conflict though, and he expands in his next protest, line (e), with shared information, "Because. You never hit me." This rational tack diffuses the conflict: Alex agrees that he won't hit Hai. But, perhaps because Alex' rule for protesting is more similar to James' rule than to Hai's, Alex repairs (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977) his acceptance, "I know. I won't," with a protest in the same turn, "I'll give ya a kiss though." Only now that the diffusing approach has failed does Hai perform a protest more aggravated than the preceding one: "If you give me a kiss, I'll beat up your girlfriend."

It happens that this threat occurs as the last protest of this sequence. Pursuing the last protest is not Hai's pattern, and it seems to happen in example four just because Alex repeats the threat that is at issue. Hai participates in thirty-five (fully analyzable) protest sequences during about two hours of class, but he has the last protest in only ten of them.

Although Hai does not prefer the confrontive pattern of aggravating protests which follow protests, he does engage in conflict. In example five, Hai taunts the other children with his finished work:

(5) (a) Alex (pointing to Hai's school box): Let me see that one again. Let me try it.
(b) Hai: (displays his math book)
→(c) Alex: So.
(d) Hai: (displays his math book)
→(e) James: So you're finished.
→(f) Lucinda: So.
(g) Hai: (sings)

In displaying his accomplishments here, Hai draws protests from the other children, but he never protests himself. Rather, he repeats the offense. He has the last turn before silence in this sequence, but he uses it to sing (presumably a victory song), not to protest, although a protest has just occurred, making another protest conditionally relevant (Schegloff, 1972).

If Hai does not prefer the final protest, then what are his patterns in protest sequences? His participation includes expressing his views and deflecting confrontation with non-aggravated strategies. Explicitly accepting another's

protest--anathema to James--is one of Hai's methods for ending protest sequences, as in example one where Hai echoes Alex' "OK," accepting James' "HE'S third." James explicitly accepts another child's protest, a very mitigated one, only once in thirty-seven protest sequences; Hai accepts explicitly seven times in thirty-five sequences.

Since communication relies on shared language systems--from the phonological level to the level of conversational style--we might expect these very different styles would produce communicative difficulties for this group of first graders, and that problems would be maximized when James and Hai protest to each other because their systems are so different. There is evidence that these two experience confusion in arguing and that it comes from their having the same general strategies in their linguistic repertoires, but using them differently.

Both boys use mitigating strategies which diffuse confrontation in protest sequences. Meeting offenses with mitigated protests is Hai's usual, unmarked style. James mitigates too, but in a restricted domain: when continuing a game depends on another child's participation. Similarly, both boys aggravate strategies which up the ante of commitment (Griffin and Humphrey, 1978). For James, aggravating, based on the previous speaker's protest, is the unmarked style. But for Hai, aggravation is marked in protest sequences, occurring when his usual approach fails or when there is reason to

believe it may fail because of previous experience with the interlocuter. But he does aggravate in other sorts of interactions: for example, in making a repeated request less indirect than the first one.

The data show that while James and Hai both use mitigated and aggravated strategies, they use different ones and they use them in different environments. One consequence is that they seem to throw each other off their conversational balance by not producing the expected linguistic environment for the other's protest. For instance, James' "So what" in example two, page four, indicates (on one reading) that Hai's "I can't because I'm reading upside down" is not relevant to the interaction. In James' system, where successive protests are more aggravated, "Read, read, just read, just read," predicts a following protest more aggravated than Hai's light refusal.

The boys' different protesting patterns produce some interesting consequences in their arguments with each other. One is that sometimes they both win, by their different systems. Again, example two illustrates this point. James gets his last protest with "So what," while Hai succeeds both in avoiding confrontation and in expressing his refusal to read.

One possible ramification of Hai's not winning, by James' standard, is that James will come to see him as a loser. There are cases, however, where Hai does win protest sequences by using taunts which are offenses, not protests. In shaking James' composure in example five, page nine, Hai makes James

lose by both James' and Hai's systems. Two of the five cases where James does not get the last word are in taunting sequences with Hai. In addition, Hai does take the final protest when he is provoked as in the interchange with Alex in example four, page eight. And finally, since protest sequences are only one sort of interaction in which Hai and James participate, James' perception of Hai does not depend entirely on Hai's protesting style.

The sort of complementarity I have sketched here which seems to ease the consequences of very different styles may be one explanation for how children cope with language use differences. Another is that some stylistic adjustments may occur across the school year. Example six hints at the development of adaptive strategies:

(6) (The boys have lost track of whose turn it is in a game.)

(a) James: Go.
→(b) Hai: Go.
→(c) James: You. YOU.
→(d) Hai: You.
→(e) James: YOU.
→(f) Hai: You.
→(g) James: Yessir.
→(h) Coong: I go fir. (first)
→(i) Hai: Third.
? →(j) James (to Coong): Go ahead.
? →(k) Hai (to Coong): Just go ahead.
(Coong searches for a card.)

As would be expected, James aggravates prosodic cues (Gumperz, 1977) in the course of this sequence-"you, YOU"--and Hai does not--"you, you." But this time, James stops aggravating, seems to give up and to suggest a compromise by way of his

mitigated order, "Go ahead," which may or may not be a protest. The resolution seems shared. This time Hai actually performs the final utterance by echoing James' last word, "Just go ahead," to Coong, and the sequence seems to resolve with neither of them losing. Two more protest sequences similar to this one occurred in my November recording; none like this had occurred in the October data, which was the first recording.

The complementarity of the two quite different systems--the fact that the boys can fairly successfully follow their own different systems in one interaction--and the suggestion of stylistic shift may contribute to our understanding of how children in culturally diverse situations, or in any classroom, for that matter, compensate for non-congruent language use systems.

Notes

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[2]I am endebted to the teacher, the children and their parents, and to the school system for allowing me to participate in and study this classroom

[3]The following transcription conventions are used here:
→ indicates protests
[indicates overlapping talk
. . Each period indicates a half second pause.
Capitalization indicates contrastive stress.
(unclear) indicates a segment of unintelligible talk occurred.
~ indicates approximate pitch contour.

[4]The data include five video-taped one hour math lessons and free play recorded in October, November, December, March and May. Peer/peer talk in which James and Hai participated has been transcribed. Protest sequences in which the outcome is not clear because the talk was unintelligible or the identity of the speaker was in doubt are not reported here.

[5]I am grateful to Cho Van Tran of the Language and Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics; and to Siti A. Suprapto, Georgetown University, for their insights.

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